"Amusing, terrifying and strange": Culture and the teaching of Japanese as a foreign language[1]

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"People bow continuously to each other...going in and out doors is a nightmare, because someone has to make the decision as to who goes first, after much "domo"ing I just go for it ".[2]

An anecdotal introduction

Long-haul flights are a good place to watch cultural difference in action. Interesting examples of this can be seen on the twelve-hour flight between Tokyo and Paris. The majority of the passengers are Japanese and most of the cabin crew are French. The common language is English. On one flight, I saw the following dialogue acted out several times:

Flight Attendant: Would you like a drink, sir?
Japanese passenger: Whisky.

As the flight continued, the flight attendant offering drinks become more and more abrupt in making the offer. It seemed that the absence of "please" in the request might be one source of annoyance. In Japanese, a customer does not have to use "please", and this pragmatic failure in the use of what for both sides was a second language led to irritation on one side and wounded incomprehension on the other.

On another flight, a European flight attendant intending to direct a Japanese colleague and her family to their seat said: "Asoko ni suwarinasai" which translates roughly as "sit over there", and would be acceptable used with intimates or social inferiors. Use, however, in interaction with customers would be unthinkable in Japan. The family meekly sat down as ordered, and so the flight attendant was oblivious to her mistake.

Both anecdotes illustrate the widely-accepted view that cultural understanding is an integral part of language learning articulated by Canale and Swain (1980: 27): "There is no strong theoretical or empirical motivation for the view that grammatical competence is any more ore less crucial to successful communication than is sociolinguistic competence or strategic competence." Kramsch sees culture as more than just an added extra to be taught in addition to language: "If ...language is seen as social practice, culture becomes the very core of language teaching."(Kramsch 1993: 8). Hinkel makes a similar point: "...a second or foreign language can rarely be learned or taught without addressing the culture of the community in which it is used." (Hinkel 1999: 2) Because Japan's language and cultures are so different to those of Europe, the teaching of culture in the Japanese as a Foreign Language class raises a number of questions which could start a worthwhile discussion about the place of culture in language courses in general and, in particular, raises questions about how best to integrate culture into JFL courses at all levels in Ireland. Interest in culture can motivate learners, but decisions on course content, materials, the linguistic items to be taught, and the order in which they are to be taught are all choices about what version of culture is to be presented and how. This article will raise some of these sociolinguistic and sociocultural issues and suggest approaches that we might use in overcoming the issues raised by them.

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[1] I wish to thank Professor Angela Chambers for comments and suggestions on drafts of this article.

[2] Comment by a second-year University of Limerick student on work-placement in Tokyo, May 2003.

Sociocultural issues: Which culture?

The development of sociocultural competence is a concern in all language teaching. An example of a sociolinuistic issue that arises in Japanese is the choice of what level of language to use. In Japanese, a speaker chooses various levels of language ranging from plain to neutral polite forms to various levels of polite and humble language depending on factors such as position, age difference and sex difference. (Martyn, 1964: 411) Is it enough in the beginning JFL classroom to practice the neutral polite level to ensure that learners do not give offence to people they do not know well, and thus take the risk that they will not be familiar enough with plain forms to speak appropriately to people of their own age and status? How aware do we need to make them of different registers, and how skilful do they need to become in the use of *keigo* (respect language)? They may also need to be made aware of when silence is more appropriate than speech in Japanese interaction, and also of which greetings need an immediate, formulaic response. The importance of this when a learner moves from a JFL environment to a JSL environment was brought home to me when the major complaint about a student's performance on work experience in Japan was that she did not respond appropriately to formulaic greetings in the workplace. We need to make learners aware of the various levels of language and of the values relating to hierarchy and age governing the choice of language used without making language classes into off-putting sessions on the avoidance of linguistic *gaffes*. In the ESOL context, Judd (1999: 161) suggests using tapes or videos of authentic speech to increase learners' pragmatic competence, and use of Japanese television dramas might have a role to play here.

How far should we go in the teaching of body language? A first meeting and an everyday greeting in Japan are accompanied by different types of bows, and an apology in Japanese, however skilfully expressed linguistically, is not an apology without the correct body language. Overdoing the body-language, however, can be nearly as perilous as not using it at all, and the JFL learner who bows too deeply or too often risks looking ridiculous.

Problems arising from the lack of "accurate and situationally specific sociolinguistic information" available in materials in the field of ESOL have been outlined by Judd (1999: 157), and the quality of some internationally-available JFL teaching materials raises similar issues. Differing pronoun usage in Japanese and English provides one example of this: "anata" translates as "you", and is routinely used in the introductory units of JFL textbooks, but has a much more limited use in Japanese, and used inappropriately, can cause offence. As teachers, we cannot afford to use materials uncritically, and we need to point out these potential problems to learners.

In a broader sense, what version of culture should we be introducing in our courses? Gray (2002: 159) has described the bland, homogenised, conflict-free version of target-language culture in current ELT coursebooks, and this prompts similar concern for the teaching of JFL in terms of how we define culture and what we choose to teach as "Japanese culture". Do we choose to deal with flower arranging, classical drama, calligraphy and *kimono* or do we opt for pop music, comics, animation and soap operas? Is it possible to combine these perceptions of culture fruitfully? What aspects of culture do we choose from a country that stretches from Siberian to sub-tropical latitudes with matching cultural variations? As Kubota (2002: 14), among others, has pointed out, Japan is not a homogenous nation ethnically, linguistically or culturally. However, there are long-standing stereotypes which assert a single Japanese cultural identity, and which, she says, have influenced the teaching of Japanese to non-native speakers: "...teaching Japanese as L2 has tended to focus on the essentialized forms of Japanese language and culture, trying to converge learners' behaviours towards an ideal norm" (Kubota, 2002: 24).

Possible stereotypical representations of Japanese when JFL teaching presents the target language mainly in relation to its own culture are problematic but are not the only issue to be considered here. Alpetkin (1993: 137) and others have pointed out the difficulties in particular of EFL reading without familiar cultural

background assumptions, and have shown that familiar schemas facilitate foreign language acquisition. In addition, comparisons between native and target culture can act as useful bridges (Alpetkin, 1993: 141). This would seem to indicate that we should also consider how material relating to learners' own cultures can best be incorporated into JFL materials in Ireland.

JFL at Post-Primary Level

The above questions have been given renewed relevance with the recent expansion of the teaching of Japanese as a Foreign Language in Ireland. While Japanese has been taught at university level here since the 1980s, and while some teachers were running their own modules in Japanese culture and language at post-primary schools around the country, the impetus for the teaching of Japanese at post-primary level country-wide came through the Post-primary Languages Initiative, which aims to increase the diversity of languages taught at Irish schools, and which began with three target languages, Spanish, Italian and Japanese, with Russian being added later.

Japanese was to be taught initially as part of Transition Year courses, and these modules began to be taught in early 2001 at eight schools. The aim of the Transition Year programme was to give learners a taste of Japanese language and culture, excite their interest, and motivate them to want to continue studying the language. These modules teach language as well as culture, but only broad outlines of course content have been agreed, because of the variation in course length and in how Transition Year modules are organised and delivered.

Initial suggested guidelines, based on successful Transition Year programmes in schools such as Loreto Secondary School Clonmel, included work on the size and location of Japan; food, transport, examples of "popular" culture such as pop music, sport, *manga* (Japanese comics) and Japanese animation. There were also suggested items on tradition and "high" culture like kabuki and No drama. Suggested language items to be covered included the two phonetic Japanese writing systems *hiragana* and *katakana* as well as some *kanji*, language used for self-introductions, numbers, prices, times, and practice reading menus.

Interest in culture seems to have been an important source of motivation to learn more about Japan; the recent fashion for *kanji* on T-shirts and other objects had increased interest in Asian writing systems, and the popularity of Japanese martial arts, as well as interest in Japanese animation and comics motivated some second-level learners to want to take the Japanese modules. Student interest dictated some of the items covered, with at times interesting results. At one Dublin school, when the teacher wrote class members' names in *kanji* (non-Japanese names are usually transliterated using the *katakana* syllabary), interest in writing *kanji* soared. Given that participants in most Japanese courses worldwide find *kanji* daunting (Okita, 1997: 62), this was unexpected and welcome. This also demonstrates one of the advantages of Transition Year courses; without a strict syllabus, teachers can respond more flexibly to learners' interests.

By November 2001, the number of schools taking Transition Year Japanese had grown from eight to nearly thirty. From the beginning, the Initiative had been involved in materials development, and by August 2002 Ursula Zimmerman, based at ITÉ and helped by a group of Japanese Development Officers, had developed a 12 unit Transition Year Pack, which could be used in Transition Year language and culture modules of varying lengths, and with varying numbers of contact hours. The teaching of culture is explicit, and includes popular culture as well as "high" culture. As well as Japanese culture, both modern and traditional, the pack uses knowledge of learners' own culture to facilitate learning about the target culture. Items on Japanese geography, for instance, are followed with an activity on Irish towns and Japan-Ireland relations. Language items are taught using various levels of politeness, and there are notes on etiquette, for example on the various types of bows and on the appropriate use of Japanese personal pronouns.

But will the Transition Year experience, predominantly culture-based as it is, lead to a sustained interest in the study of Japanese? One of the main aims of the programme is to encourage more Irish students to continue with the study of Japanese to Leaving Certificate level. The Post-Primary Languages Initiative estimates that there will be nearly 50 schools involved in Transition Year programmes in Japanese by next September. One of the indicators of that programme's success will be the number of schools running Leaving Certificate Japanese classes. In 2003, pilot Leaving Certificate classes began in Dublin and five schools in Dublin, Mallow and Galway are scheduled to begin classes next September preparing for the 2005 exam.

The Leaving Certificate is a two-year *ab initio* course. In contrast to the Transition Year programmes, language use is a priority, while linguistic and cultural awareness are important additional skills. The Cultural Awareness section of the syllabus includes the following four themes: contemporary Japanese society; the similarities and differences between everyday life in Ireland and Japan; links with Japan and discussion of international issues like pollution (NCCA in press). Though the syllabus seems to conceive of both Japanese and Irish culture as homogenous, it does mention "critically examining national stereotypes" as one of its targets (NCCA in press p. 20), and otherwise tries to achieve a balance between focussing entirely on Japanese society and the discussion of issues of international concern. Discussion of similarities and differences between the native and the target language society can also potentially reduce the rather prevalent perception of Japanese society as impossibly remote from, and alien to, western society, which can be accepted uncritically (see for example, Hall 1981: 57). How such targets will be implemented in the classroom depends on the attitude of teachers, the materials developed to teach the course and the washback from the Leaving Certificate exam itself. Questions of what culture we should teach and how we should teach it can sometimes seem remote from the everyday reality of the language classroom, but the introduction of a new language into the Irish educational system gives us all a valuable chance to reflect on our practice.

The effectiveness of the integration of culture into foreign language teaching is tested when the learner moves from (in this case) a JFL classroom to Japan. The title and epigraph at the start of the article are from an e-mail sent by a university student with about 200 contact hours of Japanese describing her impressions of her first month on work experience in Tokyo. She describes how hunger made classroom practice at using chopsticks an urgent necessity; how the custom of when to change shoes and when not to seems complicated and that the best thing is to watch what the Japanese do, and how the astounding politeness above ground disappears on the Tokyo underground. It is striking that much of the description is taken up with the thrill of successfully negotiating cultural difference, and as such it is a reminder of one of the often-forgotten rewards of language teaching; that we as teachers open the door to endless discovery and adventure.

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